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The Fashion System and Material Analysis: Issey Miyake's 132 5 Collection

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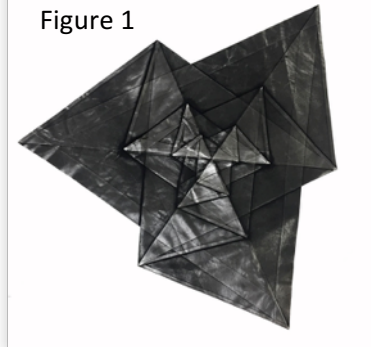
Keywords: Fashion Design, Fashion System, Issey Miyake, Material Culture

In this article, a case-study on Issey Miyake's 132 5 collection is used to unpack the relationship between material objects of clothing and fashion design within the fashion system. This ever-changing system of institutions, signs, and taste-makers is informed by theorists Roland Barthes and Georg Simmel, with this collective understanding placing emphasis on the designers, stylists, and journalists who create trends using clothes. Adding contemporary perspective to this notion is Joanne Entwistle's focus on the dressed body's role as the living embodiment of fashion. In this system, clothes themselves are not fashion, yet their production within the fashion sector initiates them as signs of fashion. In relationship to this conceptual framework, I argue Miyake's making philosophy positions his work as clothes, not fashion, and that these clothes have agency as they operate within the fashion system.

The fashion system is outlined through key theorists' texts. Barthes' describes it as a series of signs communicated through discourse; these signs are understood to be arbitrary and "elaborated each year... by an exclusive minority, i.e. the Fashion-Group." (Barthes 1990, p. 215) Georg Simmel considers social context, describing fashion as a constant "mixture of destruction and construction: content acquires its characteristics by destruction of an earlier form." (Simmel 1997, p. 195) These theories discuss the fashion system in semiotic and social terms, while Joanne Entwistle considers how clothes interact with the body and direct its ways of moving and dressing. (Entwistle 1998) Together, these theories construct a model of the fashion system where institutions such as designers and journalists promulgate accepted fashion in society, which in turn reinforce the idea as bodies dress in clothes that fit the current fashion in a constant effort to remain at once acceptable and new.

Instead, Miyake's work offers a critical response to the fashion system by focusing on the connection between designer and wearer initiated by the material object of clothing. The 132 5 collection, ongoing since 2010, reveals a making philosophy that embraces materiality and use. The pieces in this collection are made of fabric permanently pleated into folded origami shapes using digital technology. (Lalloo-Morat 2011) Detailed observation of a 132 5 piece provides insight into the interaction between material clothing and body. The folded garment was moved from a table and placed on a mannequin; it was then removed and re-folded.

Figure 1



On the table, the garment appears to be a 2-dimensional piece of fabric (fig 1) resembling origami artwork. Closer investigation reveals folds that can be lifted to reveal a structured 3-dimensional form with openings that hint at its use as clothing. (fig 2) Instead of clear openings for arms, head, etc., various configurations create a dress, tunic, or cape. (figures 2, 3, 4) Interaction with a garment from the 132 5 Collection immediately interrupts preconceived notions of how clothing should look and what the process of dressing a body feels like. By being introduced to the garment as a flat object with no correlation to the body, it is not seen as clothing. Lifting the folds and placing it on the body proposes choice in how it can be worn without limiting the wearer to a single silhouette.



From conceptual and material analysis of this piece we see the challenges it poses to thinkers on fashion, clothing, and the fashion system. The making process embraces embodied freedom of movement, materials relationship to the body, and communication between maker and wearer, giving agency to the clothing. If we place these garments within Barthes fashion system, the Fashion-Groups ability to dictate what is seen as fashionable is challenged by the important interaction between garment and wearer. Additionally, Barthes contends “In the Fashion-system, the sign...is (relatively) arbitrary,” (Barthes 1990, p. 215) but the content included in these clothes is far from arbitrary. Instead, Miyake approaches the clothes we wear as part of a more universal, thoughtful process that simultaneously considers the body, material, and function. The clothes empower the wearer to make creative choices in dress, operating as more than semiotic messengers or signs. This alternative to the norms of the fashion system challenges current understandings of how this “system” operates by suggesting a space for making clothes where the creation of a fashion is of secondary concern, thereby calling into question our understandings of the relations between fashion and clothing. This close analysis of a 132 5 piece demonstrates how clothes can be made to create a direct connection between maker and wearer, opening doors for creativity in dressing the body unencumbered by the fashion system.

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